

Representative Pete Stark (D-CA) and Senator Bill Frist (R-TN) today introduced the “Gift of Life Congressional Medal Act of 2001” which creates a commemorative medal to honor organ donors and their families. The bill makes organ donors, or their families, eligible to receive a commemorative Congressional medal to honor their lifesaving act of organ donation.

“Nearly 75,000 people are currently waiting for an organ transplant,” Rep. Stark said. “Because of a national shortage, over 6,000 people died in 1999 for lack of a suitable organ.” According to the United Network for Organ Sharing, an average of 9,700 donations per year were made between 1995 and 1999. Incentive programs and public education are critical to maintaining and increasing the number of organs donated each year.

“Traditionally, Valentine’s Day is an opportunity to shower loved ones with gifts, candy and flowers. Now we’d like to change the focus,” Senator Frist said. “Because a new name is added to the national organ transplant waiting list every 14 minutes, the gift of life is the most needed contribution a person can make today. For those taking that generous step, this legislation would honor the efforts of organ donors while also improving critical public awareness of organ donation.”

Newly confirmed Secretary of Health and Human Services Tommy Thompson has indicated that organ donation will be one of his top priorities. “We were very happy to hear that Secretary Thompson has made organ donation a priority for his first 100 days as Secretary,” Rep. Stark said. “The Gift of Life Congressional Medal Act is a great opportunity for us to work with Secretary Thompson to draw attention to this life-saving issue. Those who selflessly donate their organs deserve the profound respect and recognition of the nation. This bill accomplishes that goal, while also publicizing the need for increased organ donations.”

The medal program would be coordinated by the regional Organ Procurement Organization (OPO) and managed by the Organ Procurement and Transplantation Network (OPTN). The bill gives OPO and OPTN an initial loan of \$55,000 for the design and production of the medals. OPO and OPTN would repay that loan and then be fully responsible for financing the program.

“We must do everything we can to increase awareness of the need for organ donation,” said Rep. Stark. “Senator Frist and I look forward to working with our colleagues in Congress to enact this sensible and important incentive program.”

Representative Stark is the ranking member on the House Ways and Means Subcommittee on Health. Senator Frist is the chairman of the Health, Education, Labor and Pensions Subcommittee on Public Health and co-chairman of the Joint Congressional Task Force on Organ and Tissue Donation.